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Cushman: Limit issues in collective bargaining

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WARWICK — In his latest effort to rein in health care costs, City Councilman Robert A. Cushman is proposing a series of ordinances that would limit the latitude unions have in negotiating municipal contracts.

The proposals include requiring city and school employees and retirees who receive coverage to pay a minimum 10 percent share of health care premiums; eliminating in-lieu payments to employees who elect not to receive city coverage; doing away with lifetime health benefits, and barring the mayor or School Committee from designating a specific health care carrier to administer the city's program.

Cushman said he has proposed the changes in the hope they will "set a precedent" as city unions gear up for their next contract negotiations, prior to the 2009 expiration dates that most face.

"You look at the city's budget and 82 or 83 percent of it is personnel costs. We need to set a standard for the city in terms of sharing some of the costs so we can continue to service a lot of constituents," he said.

But several unions are blasting the proposals, saying they would violate state laws that give labor unions the right to bargain on behalf of municipal employees.

"It is unreasonable and unlawful for either party to place prior restraints or restrictions on subjects that

are mandatory subjects of bargaining," Dennis Grilli, executive director of Council 94 of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees — the state's largest public employees union — declared in a letter to the council. "Adoption of those proposed ordinances will most likely result in lengthy and costly litigation in the courts, arbitration or the Labor [Relations] Board."

The city's police union echoed that disapproval.

"Please be advised that the [Fraternal Order of Police] will have no choice but to pursue any and all available legal remedies should the City Council choose to agree with Councilman Cushman and pass his proposed health care

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reduction ordinances," union president Peter Johnston said in a July 3 letter to the council.

Cushman said that he is not out to do anything illegal. "Right now this is all a concept. I'm not going to propose anything that would violate any kind of laws. I have to meet with the City Council's attorney," he said.

Cushman said he hasn't even drafted the ordinances, though he had them placed on last night's council agenda, thus generating controversy. (The council voted to table the items until the legislation is written)

Grilli said he took action as soon as he learned of the plan. "We think those types of items should be left to the bargaining ta-

ble where they are more appropriately addressed," he said.

"There is a big difference between sending a contract to the council for ratification, which we are currently required to do, and having [the council] decide what the parameters of those discussions can be," Mayor Scott Avedisian said of the proposals.

Council member Steve Merolla, who favors the measures sought by Cushman, said the city isn't doing enough to ease its

mounting health care costs. He pointed to the recent contract settlement with the municipal crossing guards, yet to be ratified by the council, which would require its members to pay \$11 per week in year one of the contract, followed

by \$13 and \$15 weekly in the subsequent two years. A 10 percent contribution would siphon off closer to \$30 per paycheck, per week, Merolla estimated.

Under the tentative agreement, a copy of which was obtained by The Journal, the 18 crossing guards must receive Blue Cross BlueCHIP coverage, thus eliminating the possibility of changing the plan administrator from Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island to UnitedHealthcare of New England, as was proposed this spring.

The switch was ultimately voted down, 5-4, by the council, but not without a protracted fight between the unions and several of the council members who said the savings — estimated to approach \$500,000 annually — were too great to pass up in a tight budget year.

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